WHAT IS ENGLAND DOING?

By

ALFRED NOYES

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I.

This is the question about the war which one hears more frequently than almost any other in America. Frequently it implies a criticism; and, certainly till the last few months it implied a large measure of disappointment even among the warmest friends of England. The Germans have not missed the opportunity of encouraging the idea that in some mysterious way Great Britain has "lost prestige." They have been aided by the traditional British reticence, a reticence which nevertheless has its advantages; for, when results are achieved in silence, they are, in the end, doubly effective, effective in themselves, and deadly to the talkers.

The silence of "those distant storm-beaten ships" of the British Navy covers

a multitude of results—definite, solid, epoch-making results, which are only dimly realised even to-day by the world at large. Strangely enough, it is because the work of the British fleet has been so complete and so all-efficient; because it has been able to do all that was required of it, without exerting its full strength in battle, that these solid results have been overlooked by the multitude. The results of a blockade which extends from far north of the British Isles to far below the Equator are manifesting themselves now daily. Not one ship of all the great lines of the enemy is able to show its nose at sea; while, on every sea of the world, the British ships are to be found, blockading, guarding, carrying; and there are no two ships that pass, by day or by night, but with some signal, some salute acknowledging that silent and brooding power. There is no better testimony, moreover, to the way in which that power has been exercised than the sense of quiet jubilation which runs through every such instance. It is to be seen on the faces of the passengers and crews—whenever such signal confirms their faith that the

invisible ægis of Great Britain is over them, and the tragic exception has more than proved the rule. The tramp steamers, running up the Union Jack and cheering as the "Lusitania" went by, were undoubtedly, in the eyes of the whole world, on the side of the angels; and the "Lusitania medal," struck in Germany to commemorate the foulest act that ever stained the seas, has only marked the whole campaign of Germany with the devil's own seal, for all the centuries, never to be effaced and never to be forgotten.

A recent visitor to America who was asked by the newspaper reporters, after their usual fashion, what had impressed him most in his first glimpse of New York, replied: "the spectacle of the German ships imprisoned in New York harbour."

Those gigantic liners, of the Hamburg-American Line and the North German Lloyd, accompanied by a host of lesser brethren, are not so impressive outwardly as the great waterway of New York harbour, or the majestic sky-line of the City; but, in their huddled and

crowded ranks, as they lie there, they are far more significant of what is happening in the world, and they tell of an unseen and vaster power, perhaps the greatest power in the world, that has driven them into this distant sanctuary. They look as if they had been driven in by a tremendous gale, never to emerge again, the gale of the sea-power of England.

They are significant, too, of what is happening in the German sea-ports from which they came. Liners like the "Vaterland," luxurious palaces of the sea, deteriorating from day to day, in their enforced idleness, are illustrations of the deterioration and enforced idleness, the deserted wharves and ruined industry, of Hamburg and Bremen themselves. Two years ago they were engaged in the commercial conquest of the seas. There was no quarter of the world to which they were not sending (with a certain theatricality be it said) these grandiose floating emissaries of the Kaiser, decorated with his portraits and busts in every cabin and saloon and companion-way. The Germans were becoming the spoiled

children of the world, largely owing to the generous privileges accorded to them in every sea-port of the British Empire. The luxury of their largest ship—the "Imperator"—was beyond all precedent. Its Ritz Carlton restaurant was more elaborate than those in New York or London. In every respect the ship was a monument of extravagance, and spoke of a nation more than a little drunk with its own quick prosperity.

All this was changed almost instantaneously, by the silent power of the British fleet. We have heard much of what Germany could do by pressing a button. If it be asked what the British Empire is doing in the war, it would be almost enough to point to that frightened fleet in New York harbour; for, whatever else may happen in the war, there is nothing more hopelessly remote than that any of those ships should show their noses upon the high seas until Germany capitulates. Outside all the other rings of pressure that have been brought to bear upon Germany, this iron ring of sea-power has closed in, silent,

implacable and conclusive. In Hamburg and Bremen, to which the "world-end steamers," with a tonnage of millions, two years ago were bringing annually a larger share of the world's wealth, we hear to-day, of food riots.

II.

If France had been asked, in the early days of the war, what help she would expect from England, she would have replied in all probability "the help of the British navy, and perhaps an expeditionary force of 150,000 men." It would hardly have occurred to any of the allies that the greatest naval power should be asked to play the part of the greatest military power. But that was the implied expectation of many hasty minds in neutral countries. Nevertheless, behind the shield of the navy, in less than two years, the original six divisions of the British army (120,000 men) became over five millions (5,041,000) before the introduction of compulsory service. The

training of the officers alone was a gigantic task. It may help Americans to realise the magnitude of this effort if one points out that the United States, in proportion to the population, would have to raise an army of about fourteen million men, completely officered, to compare with it.

Moreover, if one is asked for definite results at this particular stage and, before this great new army has really got to work, one may point out that the movements of the Allies are on a far larger scale and of a far more comprehensive nature than those of the Central Powers ; that, therefore, they are necessarily of the slower kind which we call " sure." They are " too great for haste " ; and without falling into the grandiose manner of the Germans, one may say that, though the sun and the moon may be more obvious bodies, the movement of the stars beyond them is more important and will out-last them in the cosmic scheme. This astronomical illustration may lend a certain significance to the great slow movement which is taking place all over the world,

and to the fact that Britain has already taken part in campaigns in Flanders, Kiaochau, New Guinea, Samoa, Mesopotamia, Egypt, the Soudan, Cameroons, Togoland, East Africa, South West Africa, Salonika, Aden, Persia and the North West Frontier of India. Already, Great Britain has captured nearly eight hundred thousand square miles (800,000) of German colonies; Togoland, Cameroons, South West Africa, Kiachou, Pacific Islands, and over a quarter of East Africa. Already, therefore, she holds a very solid asset against the territories captured by Germany in her first flamboyant rush.

III.

But these larger things are not accomplished by the waving of an enchanter's wand. Gigantic organizations, of which the world hears little, have gradually shaped themselves in England. She has undertaken all the machinery of blockade and censorship on an unprecedented scale, and though this has drawn upon her the

criticism of neutrals, it may fairly be said that considering the nature of the undertaking and its vast scope, it has been worked with unprecedented efficiency. Here and there, by one detail or another, irritation has been caused; but to the disinterested spectator of the enormous whole, if such a spectator could be found—the abiding miracle is that it could be done at all. It has involved the creation of huge business staffs, by which, for the first time in history, a blockade has been carried on without over-riding neutrals and, on the whole, through winning their confidence. No ship bound for Holland has been put into the prize court for ten months, because things have been arranged beforehand, by agreement, as between gentlemen. No United States letter in transit is now detained beyond four days.

Moreover, the word "delay" which is so much used about the British censorship is often a very misleading one. At best it is merely a technical word in this particular matter; for the absurdly English facts are that, in many cases, *censored*

mails arrive at their destination more quickly than if they had been uncensored. This is obviously so, for instance, in the case of mails taken at Falmouth from ships which intend to proceed by way of the North of Scotland; for the mails thus "delayed" are sent by rail across England and usually catch the first boat on the other side, with a saving of five or six days on the war-time schedule. If there be any complaint here it should be lodged against the German mines, not against the English censors.

Moreover, I wish that critics could only see, as I have seen with my own eyes, the masses of contraband of all kinds which are posted as "letter mail" from the United States to Germany. Great packages, bearing letter-mail postage, but containing, in the aggregate, enough contraband to fill the "Mauretania," come under the rejoicing hands and laughing faces of the immense army of workers in the censorship department. The queerest disguises and strangest vehicles are used. Packets leap from the toes of boots and shoes, and packages are

drawn from the lining of clothing. "Letter-mail," indeed, is one of the most misleading war-terms in use. It leads many well-meaning neutrals to believe that the Allies are brutally holding up the rose-pink correspondence of innocent young maidens and their lovers across the cruel seas, and a hundred other fairy tales, foolish-fond or Satanically-cynical, according to the temperament of their propagandist parrot. A schedule of the goods found in the *Letter Mail* of the good ship "Christianiafford," on the 19th May, 1916, throws an interesting light on the uses to which an innocent label may be applied.

It mentions over twelve hundred packets of goods manufactured in Germany and addressed to German names in America. Some of these even contained ironmongery—springs, machine-needles, knives, pincers, metal for wireless and a hundred other moving epistolary hieroglyphs.

There was at least one German atrocity included, in the shape of a lady's dress,

directed as a sheer insult to Fifth Avenue —from Potsdam to Washington.

There were political books and propagandist literature, much of which was deliberately calculated to disturb the peace between America and other countries, notably between America and Japan. Facts of this kind may be remembered when the cry is raised that the allied censorship of German printed matter is meaningless or merely cynical. I have seen specimens of this perilous stuff that it would be sheer folly for the allies to loose upon the world.

There were packets of "bacteria," and even of chewing gum. There were twenty packets of jewellery—manufactured for the gullible, in Berlin; and there were two hundred and forty-one packets of diamonds, valued at over £23,300. These, I regret to say, were not intended as part of the "Lusitania" indemnity.

Many of the devices employed were strongly suggestive of the criminal courts. Indeed the "cunning" displayed is all of a piece with other German character-

istics in the war—the initiation of gas attacks, the fear of being poisoned, which German officers have displayed, and the actual use of disease germs in South Africa; all cunningly suggest the criminal, rather than the knight in shining armour. Submarine and Zeppelin, too, even though we be forced to adopt them, are the felons, not the knights errant of modern war.

The only genuine American letter that has yet been really held up is probably the one which I saw displayed on the wall of the censorship museum; and, in any case, it could hardly have reached its destination. The authorities regarded it, however, with something like affection, and the envelope was distinctly the favourite decoration of that varied art gallery. It was addressed to:

William Hohenzollern, Esq.,
Potsdam Palace,
Berlin.

If party is absent, please forward to St. Helena.

It contained a collection of the most vigorous cartoons of the Kaiser, from the "New York Evening Sun," and several newspapers of the Middle West.

IV.

In addition to the gigantic work of the censorship department, it may be said that British Munition factories have increased from something inconsiderable to over four thousand, under Government control. It is probably true to say that more munitions of war of all kinds, from hand grenades to aeroplanes, and from trench mortars to big guns, are produced in one week now than were produced in the whole first year of the war.

Wherever one goes in Great Britain to-day, from one end to the other, there is only one thought and one vast impulse. Britain at last is mobilized for war, the achievement to-day far surpasses the wildest German idea of "kolossal."

The British pre-war capacity for making munitions for land services was adapted to our army of 200,000 men. The French capacity was for an army of three to four millions. The number of work-people now employed on British Naval munitions approximately equals the total at

work on French munitions for both military and naval services. We are supplying shell steel to France at the rate of half a million tons a year, other steel at hundreds of thousands of tons a year, coal at one and a half million tons a month. The consequences of the temporary loss of the French industrial districts thus falls largely on Great Britain.

The British monthly output of heavy guns and howitzers for land service is thirty-three per cent. in excess of the total available for the army in the field before the war. England has sent to France tens of thousands of tons of constituents of explosives.

This must not be mistaken for a criticism of our magnificent allies, who by their indomitable valour saved Europe and the world, during the darkest hours of the war. It is merely an answer to the question : " *What is England doing as her share?* " It is not a matter of rivalry, but of co-operation, and our allies have always generously recognized the share of Great Britain. The best that we could do is our only adequate return for what

France has done; for France has given her all, and England now, also, is giving her all.

The silence in which the work has been accomplished was often necessary to its success, and it never deceived our allies. English help at Verdun was not required by Joffre for the very grim reasons which are now becoming apparent in the "great offensive" where the British in turn are grappling with the massed forces of Germany.

It is hardly an exaggeration to say that without the help of British finance and British munitions, the great Russian offensive would never have taken place; for, on this side also, an immense burden has been quietly shouldered by the British people.

The truth about the British conduct of the war, and of what is to come as well as what has been done, is to be found in that large and steady movement which will endure to the end.

V.

Indeed, the only way of obtaining anything like a just view of what is really

happening in the war is for the individual to do a little co-ordinating on his own behalf; to look at the Russian offensive, for instance, in connection with the heroic resistance of the French at Verdun. It was this resistance which reduced the mobile elements of the enemy to the point where the Russian attack was sure of success. The allies have consistently worked on the principle that the lives of men are more than time or money; and though, as a writer in the "Westminster" said of the magnificent Russian offensive —"it appeals more to the imagination to take towns and force the passage of rivers and recover territory—that fetish of the uninformed—than to break up attacks on a range of shell-scarred hills and to stand up against jets of liquid fire," yet the Russians themselves will certainly not withhold their tribute to the splendid valour of the Frenchman who enabled them to do these things. And in this great co-operation of the allies it is after all most satisfactory that the French themselves should speak of the part played by England. They have done this, a thousand times, in the most generous way, to the confusion of the

German agents who would sow discord. Yet, it may be repeated, there *is* poetic justice in the fact that, alarmed by the preparations for the British offensive, the Germans massed their strength to meet it; that the British in turn are now paying their share in flesh and blood; and that the French, who bore the brunt so long, are breaking through.

Time was necessary, the time secured by the fleet, to bring the power of England into play. This is not because she was more sluggish than her neighbours. It is partly due to the same cause which makes it easier to handle a rifle than a howitzer.

Upon this fact the German agents in all countries concentrated, in order to sow discord between the allies by invidious comparisons. It may be said in warning, therefore, to thousands of innocent people, that in repeating the suggestions of failure —on the part of England or any of the allies—to do their own share in this life and death struggle, they are the unconscious instruments of German propaganda.

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